



FEFFERI

ZINE

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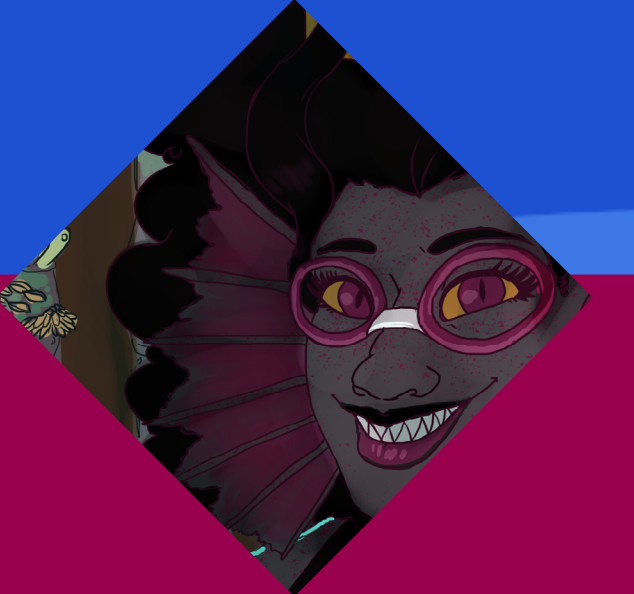


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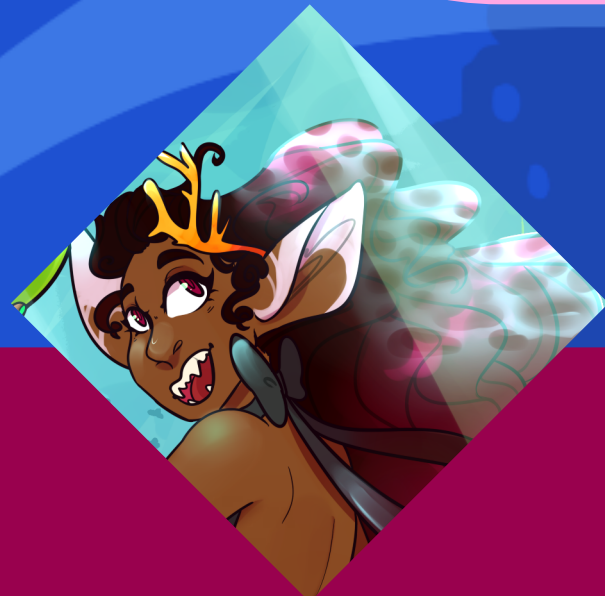
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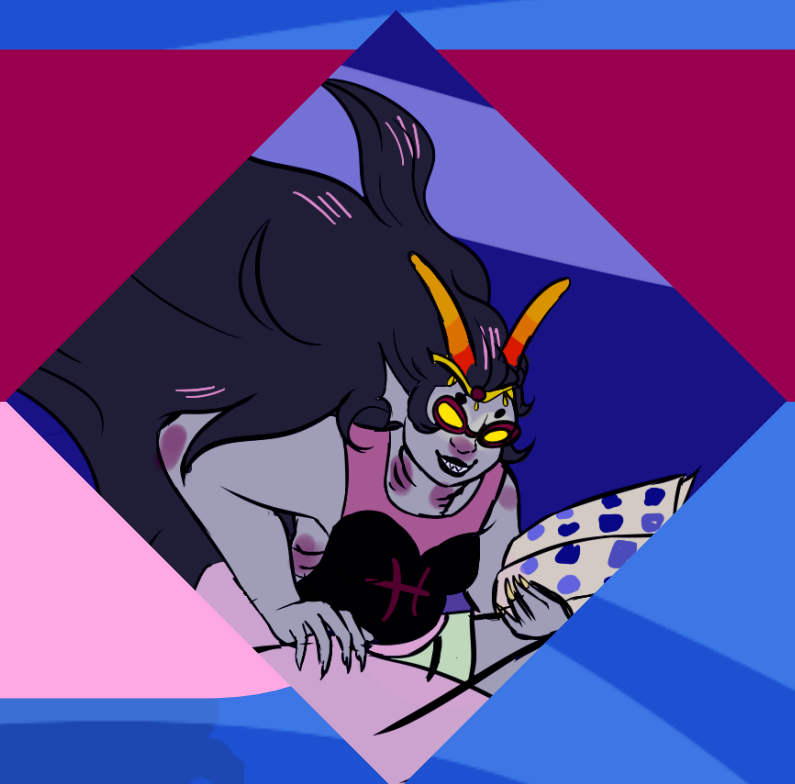
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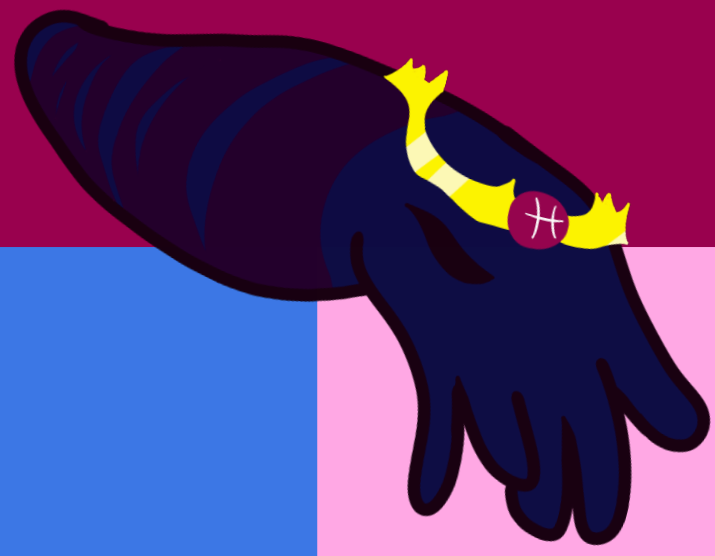
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The Abyssal Verse

by auxanges

When time first began to unravel its cord, there was only the sea. She knew everything, and everything knew her; all in her dominion bent the knee in accord with her rise and fall.

—what?

Yeah, I know it's corny, but that's how they wrote it, okay? So just...just listen.

The sea's first daughter hatched long before anything crawled ashore. She listened to the cresting of waves above her, and the shifting of the sands beneath. She wove jewelry out of kelp strands and coral, and sang to her mother. And this pleased the sea greatly, and she bestowed long life upon her child.

Before long, creatures began to fill the oceans, first small, then greater and greater, until the child fancied they would eclipse the very stars. They bled the same blood, and sang the same songs, and for a time all was calm at sea.

But the sea is ever-changing, and soon a second daughter emerged from the mouth of the cavern. The first daughter did not know what to do—such a small creature would obviously not survive long in this world of giants. After much time to reflect, she found her answer in the whisper of the reeds and shushing of crabs and shells.

The first culling was still quick, and still merciful. She did not leave her sister to suffer. And when she felt shame for her actions – *duh, what, you think you're the first troll to invent guilt? Now hush* – she wept onto the bones of the second daughter. Her tears gilded her ribs, and sharpened her fangs, and from her heartache she fashioned a weapon.

It came to be that the first daughter would need this weapon quickly, for the sea grew restless once more. This time, it was hunger. You see, in the time the first daughter had taken to decide how to handle a second child of the ocean, there was no one to keep the sea-mother sated. She began to moan, and wail, and all around the daughter beasts would float belly-up; her fins would tremble and ache; blood would pour from her—

Wait, hey, don't. Don't go. I'm sorry, okay? This is important stuff.

Okay. I'll skip it and everything. Uh—fins trembling, blood blah blah orifice, somethin somethin agony...okay, cool, here we go.

The child began to think of this as her punishment, and became angry. Not with the sea, who had given her life and food and shelter, but at this second child, who had twisted her thoughts and planted this doubt deep in her mind. When a third daughter surfaced, she struck her down without question. And this time, she did not weep.

Now the fourth child was just as small as the others, but she was quiet, and she was clever. She sang the same sea-songs but bloodied her hands with creatures that could have swallowed her whole. In doing this, she gained her strength, and when the time came when she was to be culled she gripped the trident and drove it between the first daughter's ribs.

And this was the first overthrow, and the woven crown tumbled from her hair and at the fourth child's feet, and when she placed it on her own head the sea held its breath to watch and listen.

By now the daughters' blood had mixed with salt, and when the sea felt this she screamed anew; lightning tore the sky asunder, and bolt after bolt struck the waves for seasons on end. Great mountains breached the whitecaps and spat fire and smoke. When it was all over, continents spread themselves across the sea, barren only for the blink of an eye.

No, no trolls. You're still not payin attention! It'll be a sight longer before—

I don't know how long, they hadn't invented time yet, I guess.

Haha, nah, I guess I don't know everyfin. Everything, fuck.

Sorry, shouldn't say fuck. Let's keep goin, yeah?

Hang on, I lost my fuckin spot.

Amid the shaking of the earth and the shrieking of the open sky, the cavern had begun to rise. New children crawled their way free. The first of these stumbled forth, and caught the next jagged blast of lightning to strike the surface in his palm. He offered this gift to the princess with a bent knee, and she accepted, and this was the first right hand of the Tyrian Line.

...yeah, haha. That's me.

Sweeps passed, measured in the roaring of tides, rising of floors, raising of temperatures. The children that struggled ashore had never known the frozen embrace of the sea-mother. When word of this sank slowly back among the reeds, she wept. It was low. It was deafening to the bones. Even those on the dirt fell dead, and their souls trickled into the sand and fed the gardens of new beginnings.

Deep, deep beneath the glow of the moons, the sea's daughter and her second trained: the mother's crying settled over their fins, and they swore to soothe her, as it had been before the great rising. They bided their time, and when the waves next cast their highest shadows over the beaches they raised weapons against the lesser children; the finless sons and daughters who swore their allegiance to dirt, their depths forsaken.

There was bloodshed the likes of which will not be seen for millennia.

The remaining land children — *whose children are they? You ever wonder what they really believe in? No I will not ask I have a little somethin called pride, thank you* — built foundations in the sand. They slipped, and sank, and the sea-daughter watched: when she was eventually struck down by a younger princess, her own second at her side, she took up the mantle, and watched in turn.

Crown after crown dangled from endless strands of sea-grass. The garden of empire is tended by every princess, fed in blood and salt and song.

Ugh, symbolism. They must have changed authors here.

The lineage has continued thence, and is destined to follow the pull of the stars into oblivion. So sings the sea-mother.

Wait.

That's it?

This looked way bigger on the shelves. Hang on, lemme—

There's a shit ton of blank pages. Nobody bothered to keep goin.

...you think so?

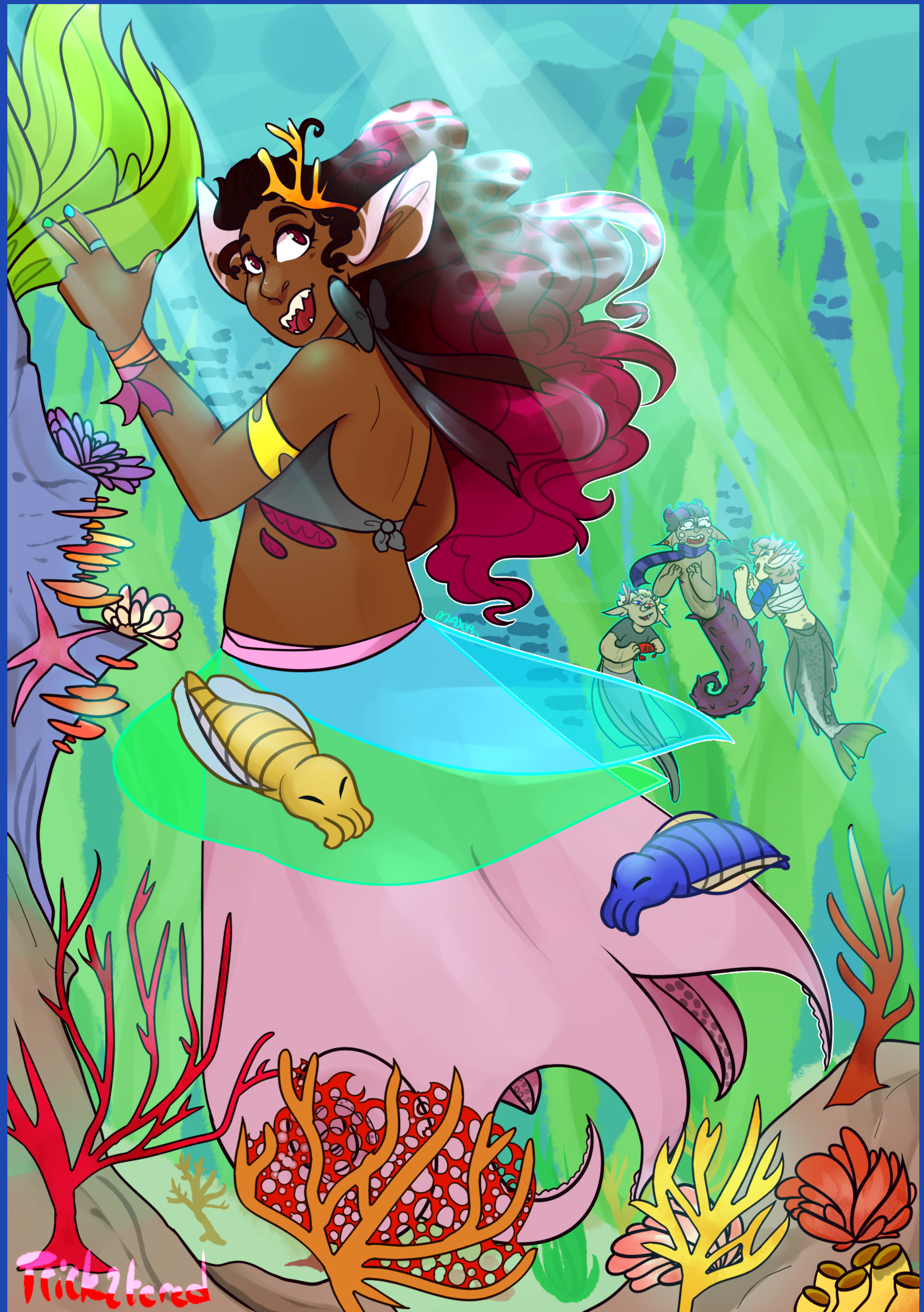
I do think you can do it, Fef. You can do anything, you're talkin about it all the time.

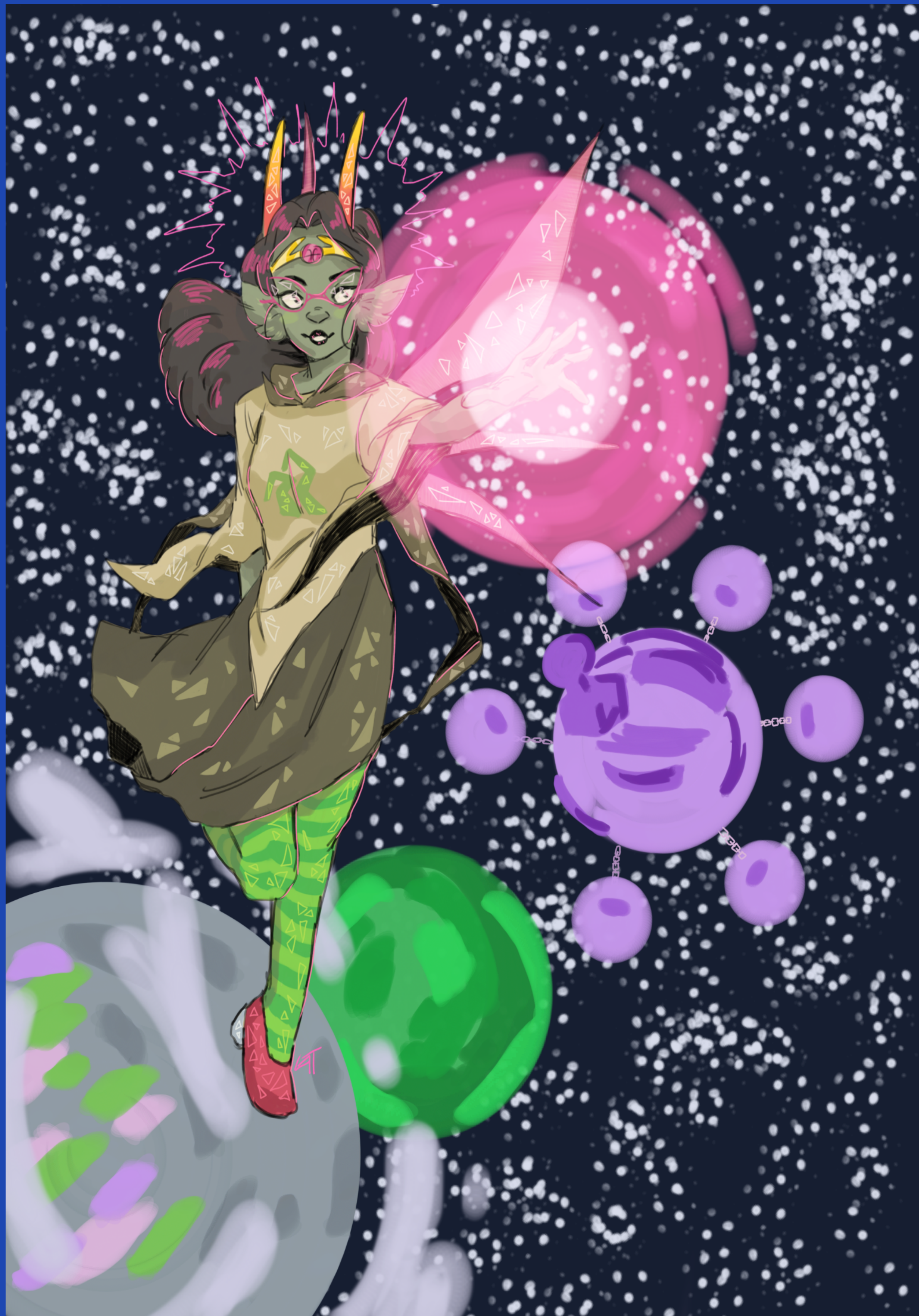
Aboat it. Yeah, that one's free.

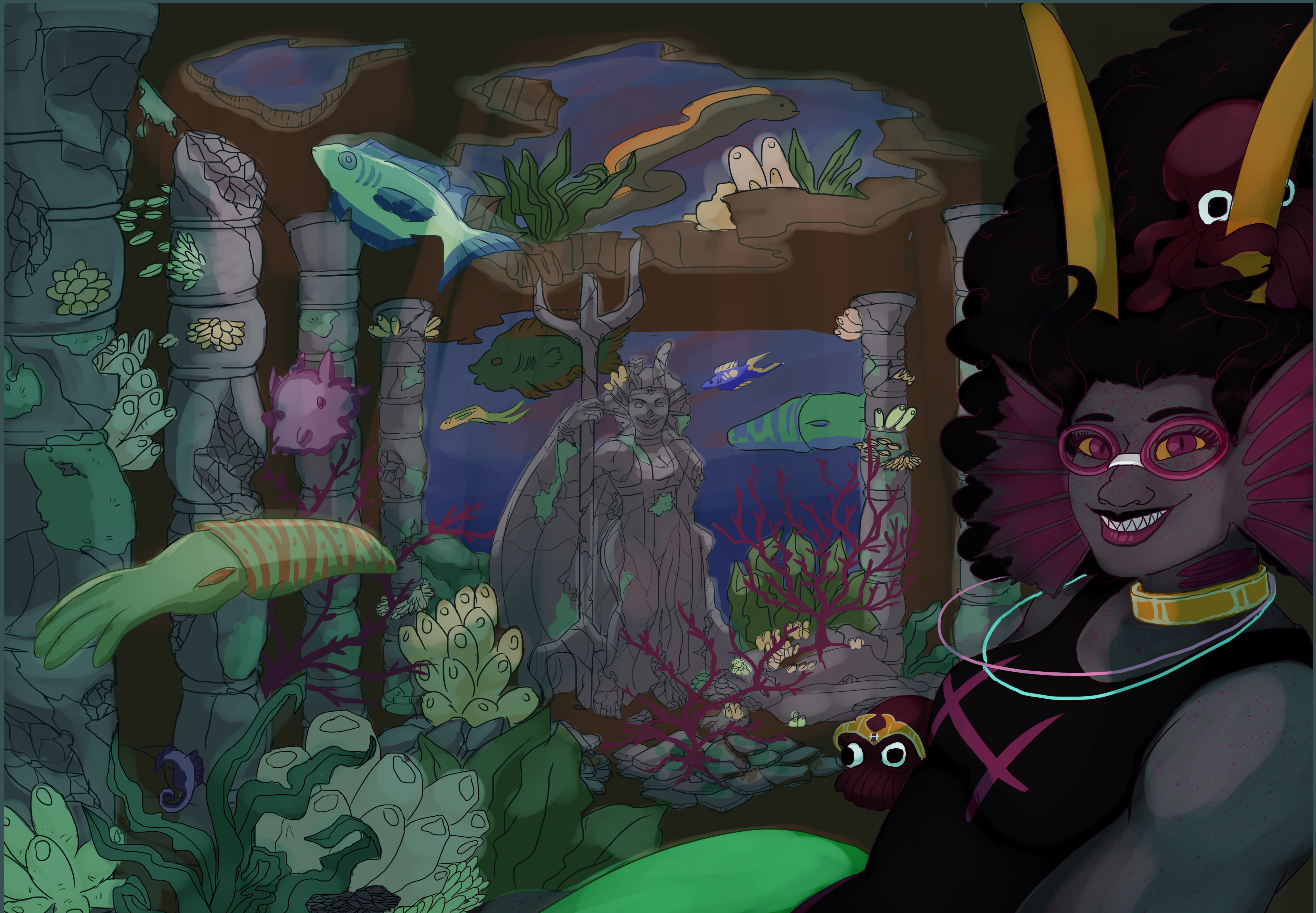
So how about it? You're the next crown in the lineage. So sings the sea-mother.

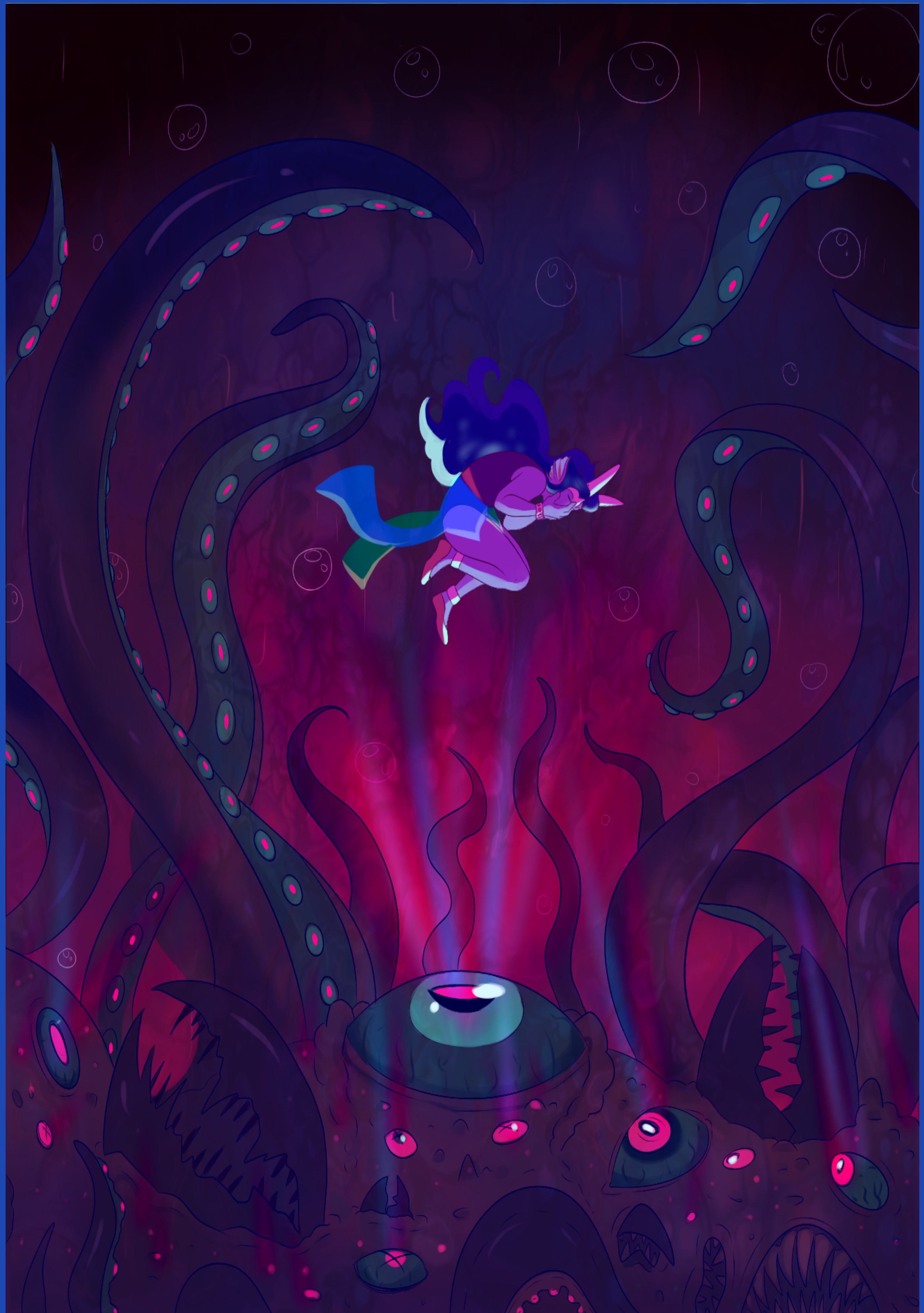
Your name is Feferi Peixes, dammit.

What will you do?











CC: More blubber spills out of that mouth than a gash in a poached whale

Battles

by Scy



Eridan schools you at this relentlessly. Quick to attack, slow to retreat; it must be your motto to never show weakness, to never seem the easy target, to never present your unprotected back to those who might decide to take advantage of it.

You do not argue this; you do not always agree. The less you agree, the wider the cracks go, the gaps go—the better your spars become. It is a fierce and dangerous kind of inversion that threatens to boil over at the first sign of trouble.

Sometimes, in all your (four, five, six—) sweeps of wisdom, you wonder if it is the only way seadwellers know how to live.

(Step Four: Follow the downward swing with a sweep back, forward thrust.

You did not plan on this battle. You refuse to lose this war.)

When you move in the water, you can feel the world turn around you. You are told, by the helmstrolls you manage to contact, that it is the same in space. All of your friends insist that it is very, very different on land, and you don't know how to disagree. Fighting on dry land isn't something you're anywhere near as familiar with as they are, and you're loathe to contradict what you do not understand.

Ignorance does not become you: you are driven, and you always have been. The less you know of something, the more you want to work at it. Sometimes people call it stubborn, and as much as you'd like to argue, arguing might only prove it to be even more true.

(Step Three: Sweep the weapon up, flipping your grip to bring the swing down.

You can see pieces of your *lulus* in all the elements of this creature, and it hurts. You were never meant to destroy something when you could create.)

There are several impossibilities in the idea of an Heiress winning in a fight against *Imperious Condescension*. Much as you want to discuss them, your friends are determined that you focus specifically on the possible—they're worried that you'll lose heart, if you try to consider everything you can't do. It's sweet, but you don't need sweet right now. You need this to be okay, to be over and done with. You'll have time for sweet later.

Then again, some of them aren't even sure why you're starting your training now, when so many of them are content to wait for their assignments and future positions, or even, in a few cases, their Ancestor's orders.

What luxury they have, and unknowingly so.

(Step Two: Push to block left, twist to block right.

The first rain of attacks comes in heavy, and you're not sure how the twelve of you manage to endure it. Your defense, as much as your offense, seems cobbled together out of whatever you could find on your separate worlds in this joint session.)

I would rather protect people, you remember saying, once upon a time when the world was still quiet, before fire streaked the sky, before everything you knew and everything around you turned into a battlefield for a cold god's game. It's funnier, now that you know the final enemy—final boss—that cold god, is not even the frigid empress you'd been training your whole life to face.

You don't expect this game to be a circle. You do not expect to see the beginning of this fight and make it to the end (though you do not tell your friends, who wanted you to focus on the positive), you do not expect then end of this to mean any kind of beginning.

(Step One: The battle begins.)

You really wish you didn't—all twelve of you—have to grow up this fast. It's easier to remember growing and playing and learning with Eridan, hearing more of Vriska's *FLARPventures*, talking to Aradia about the sea caves she could explore near your home. Easier to talk hunting tactics with Nepeta, word everything as ambiguously as possible with Equius, trade puns and animal care tips with Tavros. You miss being able to see and be seen by Sollux, you miss the caring Karkat of the game's beginning, you miss Kanaya's wit and Terezi's color, and sometimes you think you might even miss Gamzee.

It kind of sucks! It kind of really sucks, setting aside all the things that make the twelve of you, well, you, to focus on who and what the game is trying to make you be. As easy as it would be to step into the shoes of a Witch, you're kind of thinking...maybe you want to do this thing as, well, you.

(Step Zero: Guarantee your own win.

The bubbles are a curious creation, and as the Lords of the Outer Rings inform you, not one that they ever thought they'd end up creating. You have a feeling they don't mind very much, and that they'll be grateful for the company in the end. Talking them into it, winning them over, is no less a battle than any other you've fought, and the battle you're most proud to win.)

Call Up The Deeps

by Scy



call up the deeps

comes the whisper from farther below than anyone else could go. For you, for yourself, for Feferi Peixes—as anyone worth knowing knows you—no depth is deeper than the one you call your truest home.

Homes.

You've found more than one and you hold yourself to that, keeping two worlds carefully carved apart, a kind of culling—caring—that seldom few ever understand. There is a distance, in the depths! There is a wide range of space that many see as all too hard to find. It's no concern of yours, it's never concerned you, beyond the quietest little nudge of "remember to do", but then

call up the deeps

and all of a sudden everything could change into something you know all too well, a place-space-time that not even time could tell, it's unthinkable, unthinkable so.

You're thinking.

Maybe it's a little too complicated, the way you've let things go? Maybe you can be a friend, a play-mate, a bubble of laughter, and the sea witch's daughter, the Empress' heir, all at once? Maybe two separate spaces have ever been one, and the distance between them is no more, nothing but a manufactured product of an overactive—or is it overeager—imagination, already ready to take flight? You could

call up the deeps

to give you an answer, for who else would know, who else would have anything even approaching a solution for a situation that is untenable, unthinkable, caught between flotsam and jetsam and the truest things carried in on the tide?

Ancestors?

They are as they come and they are as they go, everyone would say it's so and none of them would say it louder than you? You who has met your Ancestor in waking and dreaming, has been well aware of her scheming since almost the day you were hatched—you know. You know the weight, the cost, of each little life she's spent, each troll turned into another pawn for her endless plans upon plans upon plans and sometimes you think you'll be the next, and sometimes you know that you already are, and sometimes, sometimes, it feels like you have no options so

call up the deeps

with a claim on your head, on your heart, on your soul, where else would you have to turn but the ocean, where else could you get lost but the waves, the waves that love you so?

Questions.

They're all you have left when the answers are fleeting, run like sand through your fingers, and linger, the words that they were all lost on a wave. You'd wonder if wings were quite halfway to dreaming if you weren't so certain wings wouldn't behave—they wouldn't serve you nearly so well as fins, of that you're aware. You're also aware when your mind turns to poetry, the songs that you're singing

call up the deeps

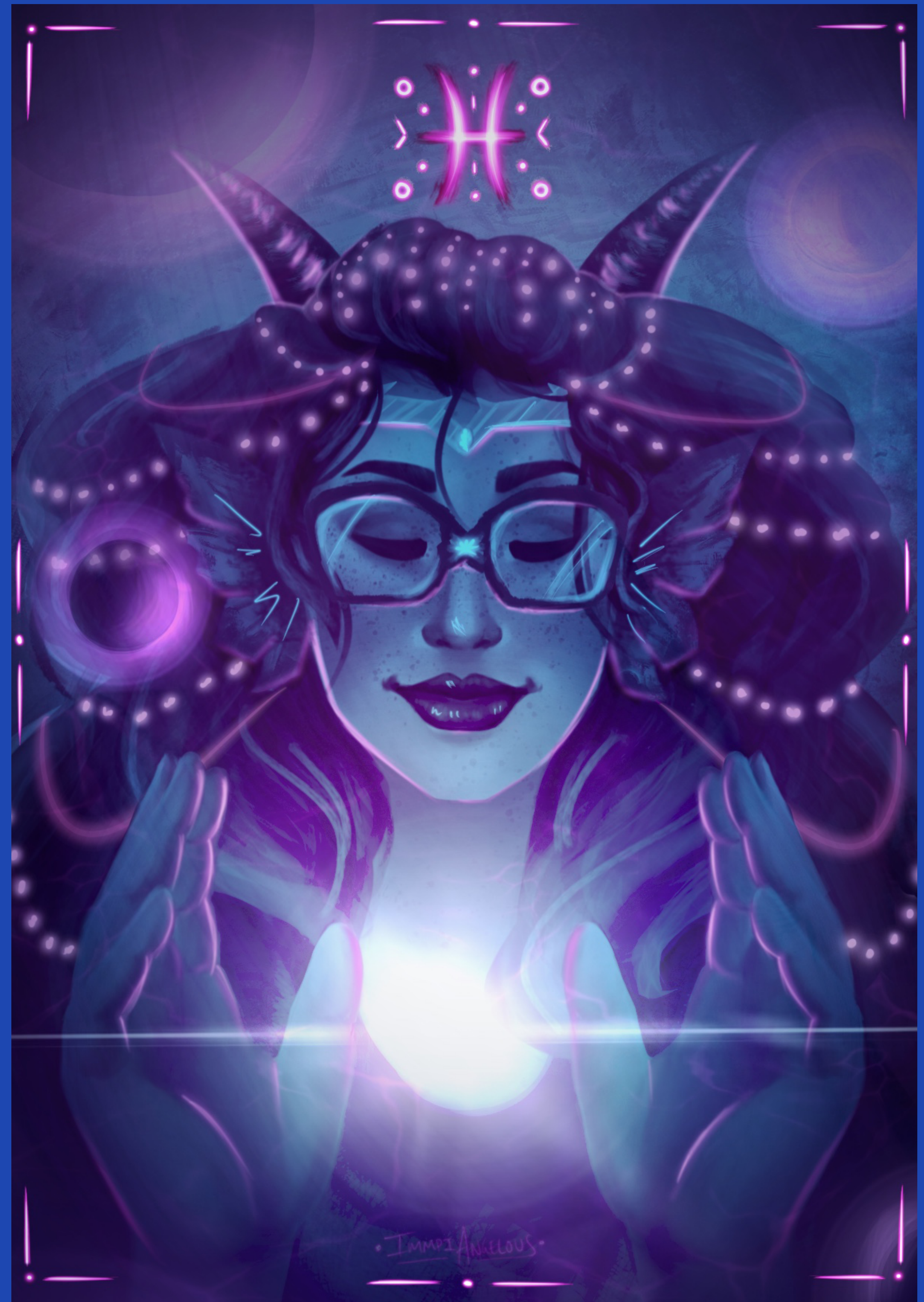
it's an endless refrain, taunting and haunting, and here you are: Feferi Peixes, the last little wonder of an unwanted world; the deeps, a home you've outgrown that's become an unknown; the game, an answer and question all in the same time.

It's impossible.

Or—maybe it would only be possible if you'd stopped to take a breath, between moments. Mischiefs. Magics. You dreamed up the bubbles, when you called up the deeps. Your Ancestor toppled an empire. Your descendant might do even more, if you have one. Maybe you moved to swiftly. Wrote off all your hopes before they were plans. Some part of you wonders, as it always has, if it's time to

call up the deeps.





Raving Ones

by Jude Lurker



And you woke up.

The cold tongue of saltwater lapped your lower half, legs half-submerged in the sand. Strange pink foam filled the hole in your chest, and with every breath, it thickened and turned dark as a sweet clot. When you stood up, you felt your cracked ribs rearranging themselves back into place. Part of your spine was gone, but you rose without any effort.

Hair floated around your head as if you were charged with an archaic power, and black tendrils of it curled in the driftwood a few feet away, seeking a warm crevice in the manner of a proboscis. Little crabs moved like lice over your scalp, and their claws became teeth for your hair. Nothing was capable of hurting you anymore.

You could feel it then, the weight of your body and the wound. The wind passed through you the way water ran through your gills, and nausea churned where your stomach should be. Otherwise, you were fine. A dull pain throbbed behind your eyes, but that was because of the music.

It wasn't really music - just instruments in cacophony, trumpets and drums and flutes. And laughter. On the beach maybe a thousand girls were dancing. Not a single man or an unfamiliar face. There you were at three sweeps, skipping with yourself at five. Younger witches guided older ones by the hand around bonfires or through tide pools. Their scales glimmered like drops of blood in the night.

Some of them were naked, adorned with jewelry like real empresses with three-tier tiaras made from the chitin of horns. Others wore hoop earrings, plastic beads, golden and bronze bracelets stacked together. A dozen girls walked around bare-chested, and their long skirts unfurled like octopus limbs when they twirled, sandals imprinting their frenzy in the soft damp sand. There were a few girls hidden by veils, phthalogreen and blue fabric as light as the wind trying to snatch it away. Beneath the veils their faces were streaked with ash. The lucky ones had wings with pink veins under the gossamer surface, somehow strong enough to support them as they swooped in the air and over the fires.

Their music had no rhythm, only endless passion. Bassoons and harps and cymbals. Crashing and booming and crooning like storms at sea. The girls delighted in their hundreds, in the sweat-drenched shine of their oiled grey skin blending together like smeared paint. Ankles flashed and arms waved and hair grew and grew and grew. All these dead girls sang and laughed and danced in the tropical weather under silverfish clouds.

They played in the shipwreck across the beach, swinging from the crow's nest and jumping over the wine-dark abyss between wooden planks. Like elephant seals slapping their bellies, they clapped their hands together and screeched with delight. On the crowded deck, big girls with even bigger horns and seashells behind their ears broke coconuts apart and poured the milk over themselves. They weren't drinking. Unsmiling, they bared their teeth and stared wide-eyed as the milk coated them in a second skin. Little girls with sharp teeth cracked open lobsters and ate them raw, shoving the pink-white meat piece by piece into their mouths.

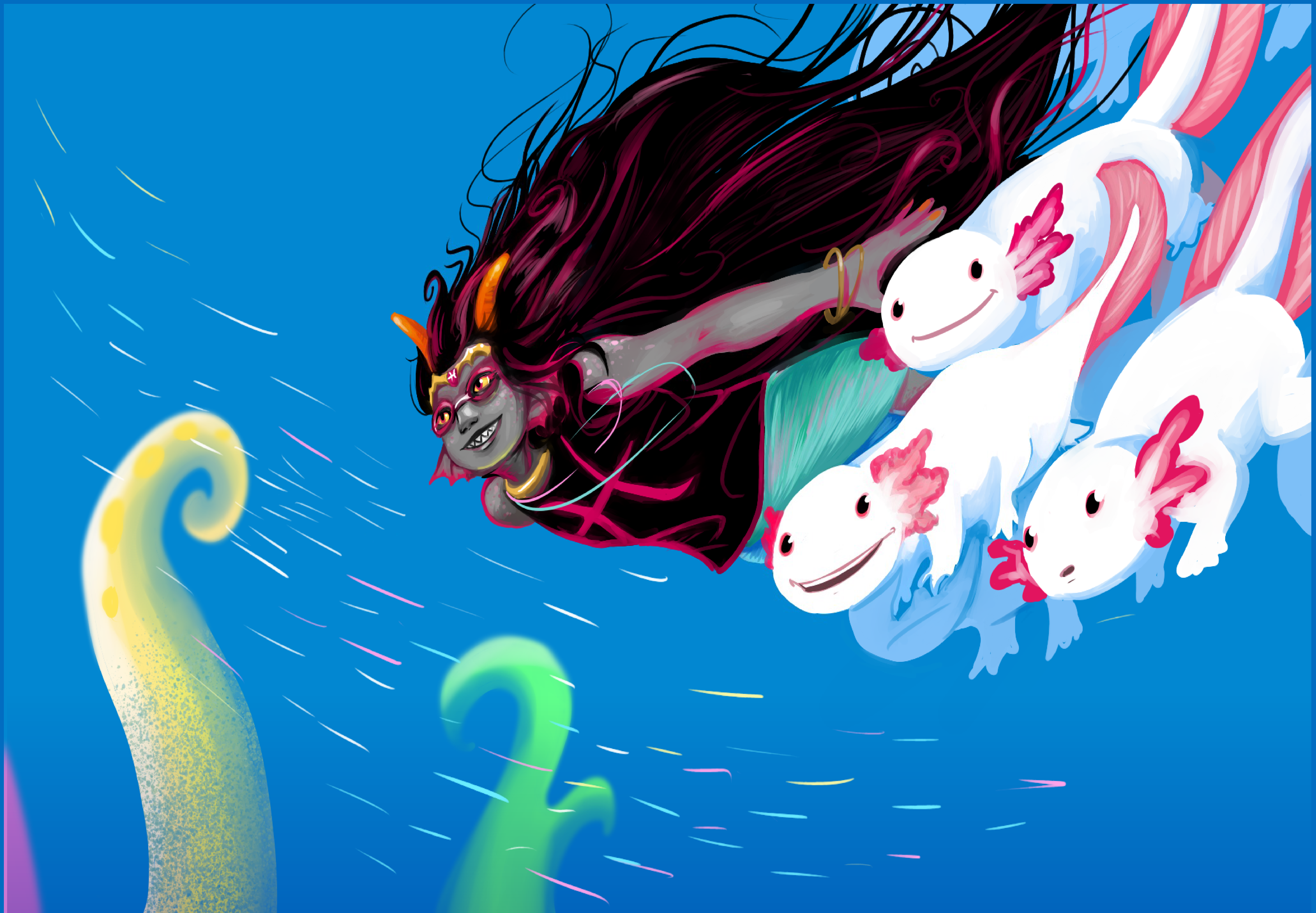
When they popped the hollow fronds of seaweed, ribbons of opaque black air released and honey covered their webbed toes. They giggled and popped more bubbles. Everywhere it was dark except for the smoke, the flames, the whiteness of their teeth and eyes. Girls tossed their heads back, hooting and howling and ripping death itself apart. You were among them now, deep in the heart.

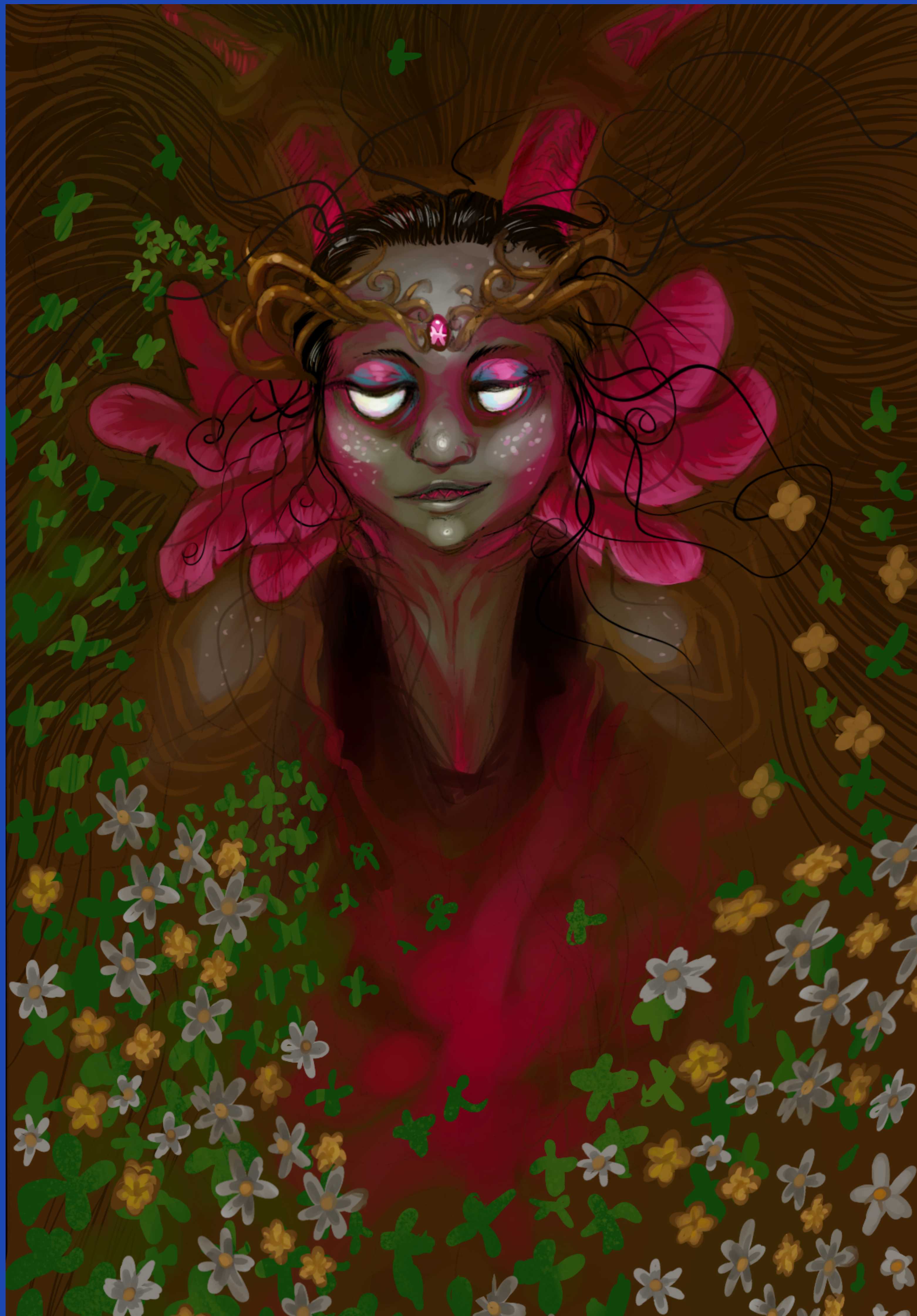
Flowers bloomed in rainbow colors, opening towards you in bright shark fins of poison. Shadows of palm trees turned into iridescent fish and swam away. Braids of hair threaded over the stars and eventually threatened to swallow the moon, that lone harpoon stuck in the whale's white belly.

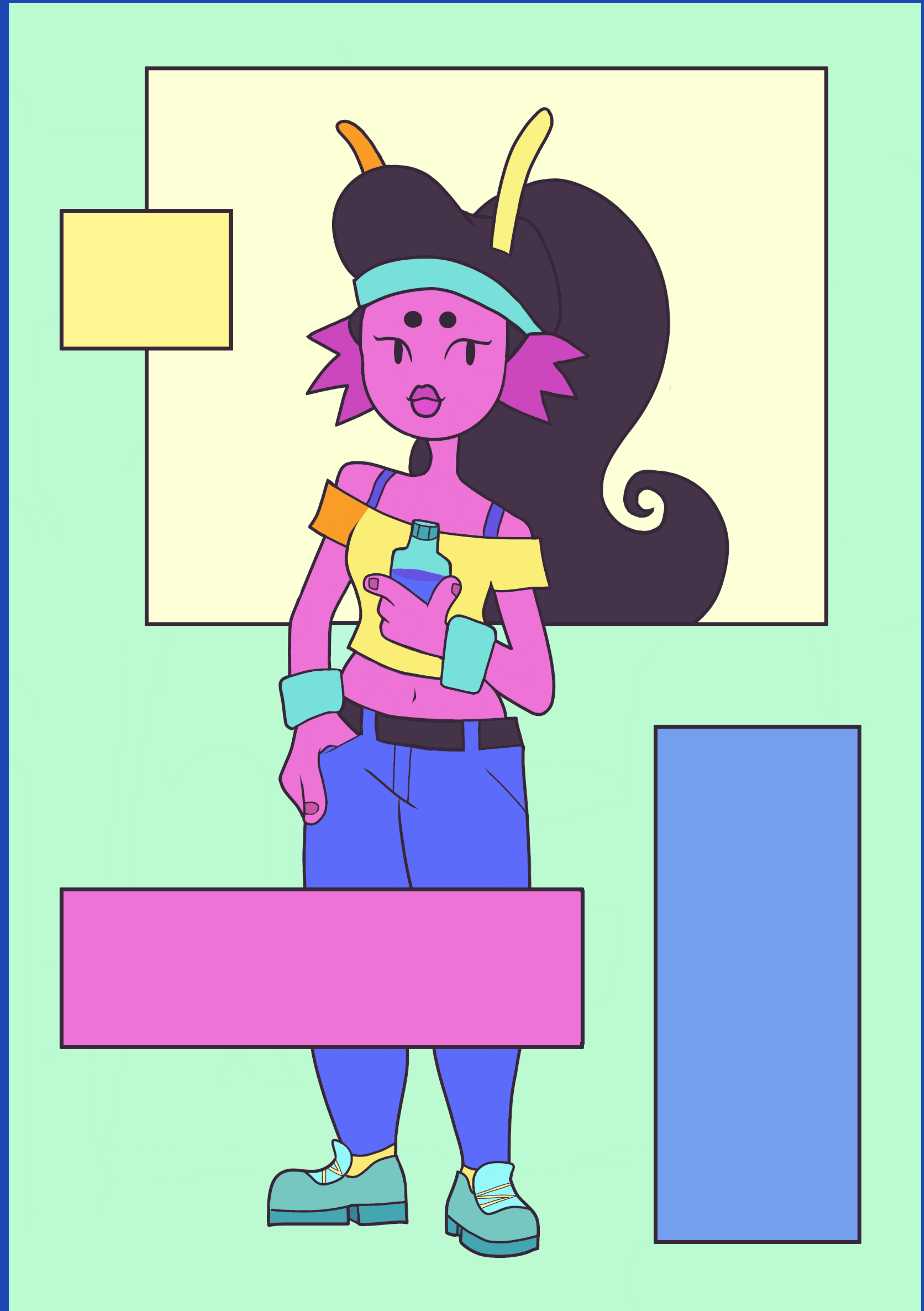
You were gods. You knelt before the ocean and it prayed to your name. Years came and went. Time reversed until you were a grub again, squirming in the arms of an ancient Peixes matriarch. Seconds later, your hair spiraled in blue-black circlets and your horns pierced the sky. Cracks spread like hands reaching across the darkness. When they touched, lightning flashed at their fingertips and girls screamed with the echoes of thunder.

The world ended twice and the beach remained.



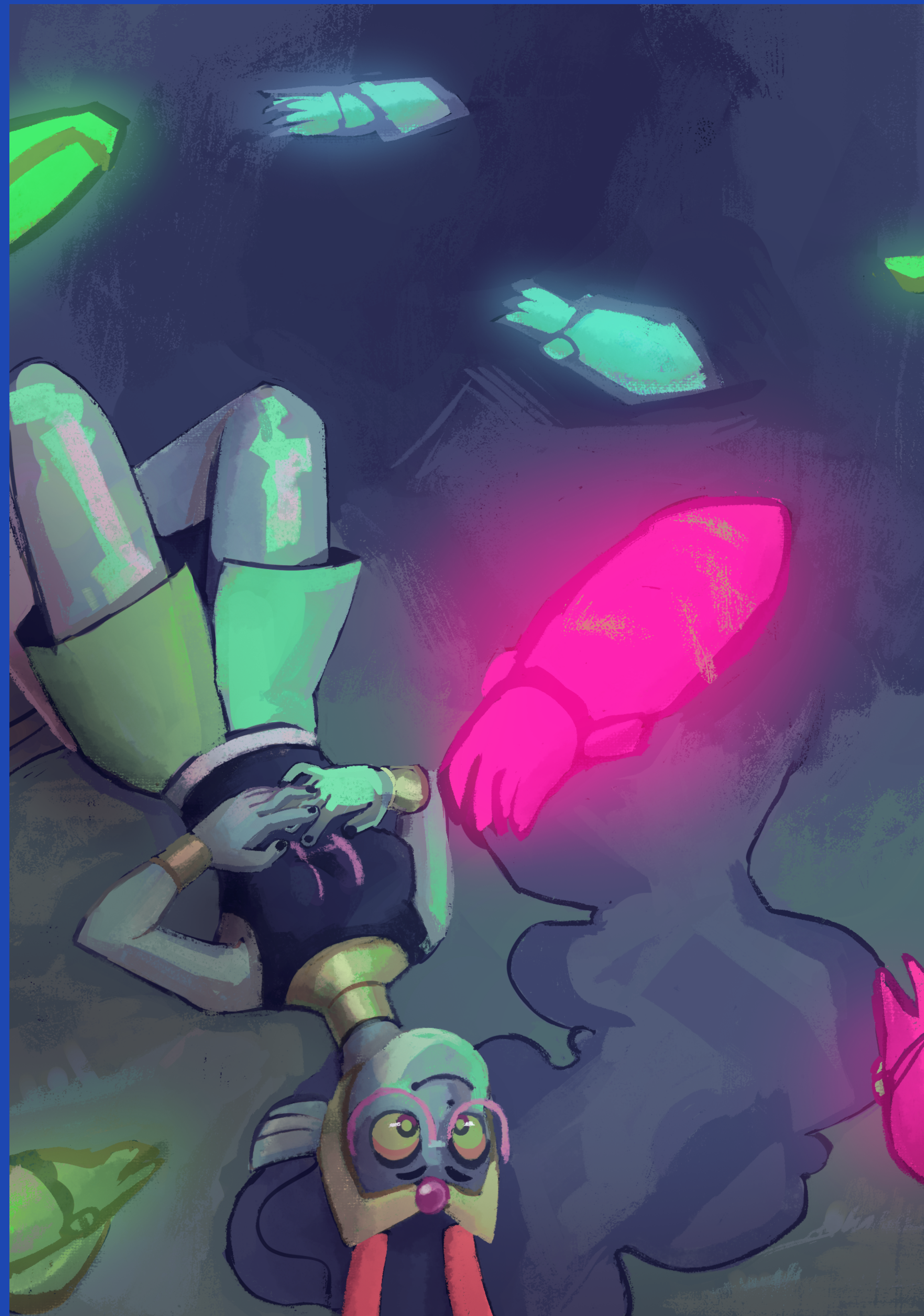






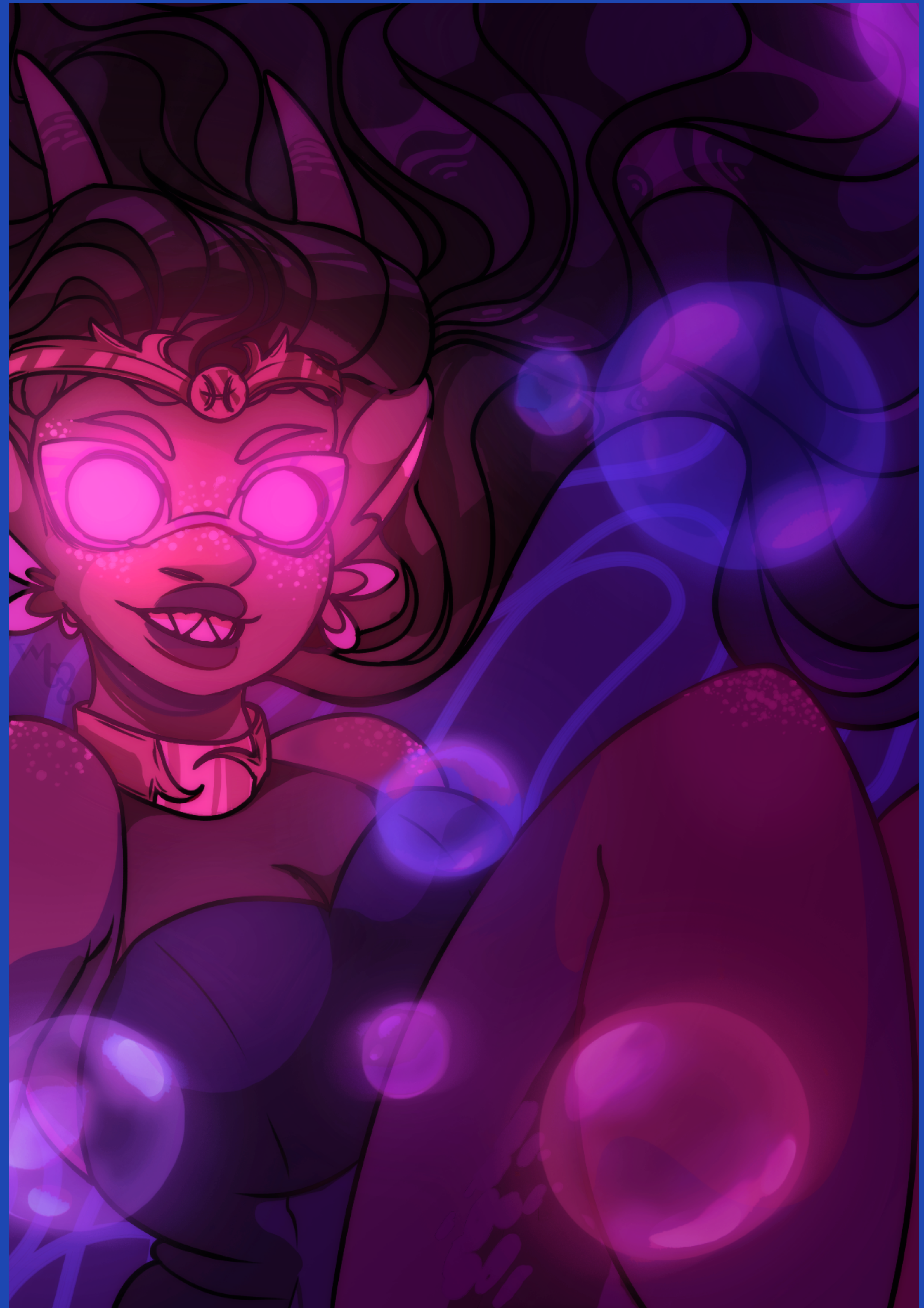












What We Are Isn't What We'll Be

by Rafi/muchlessvermillion



Feferi wasn't sure if there had ever been a time she hadn't known.

For the first sweeps of her life, she moved more comfortably underwater than she did on shore. Land was groggy, slow. Gravity pulled on her, left her unbalanced and weighed down, and she didn't like leaving footprints in the sand to show where she'd been, hated carving a path for someone else to follow when she could move through the water without even making ripples if she tried hard enough.

Feferi was far from the first and far from the last Alternian wiggler to be taught how to hold a weapon as soon as they grew arms to do it with, starting underwater long before she ever pulled it from the waves. The trident was like an extension of her arm, after so many sweeps. Chubby fingers that could barely fit around the handle grew into something longer, surer, stronger. There was no 'wiggler's first weapon' version, not for heiresses. The trident was a part of her birthright as much as her horns were, as much as her teeth. It had always, always been waiting for her, before she was even hatched. It had been waiting for her because throughout Alternia, other people were waiting for her, too. Because by her own volition or someone else's, she would have to fight, no matter what else she chose. Everyone fought, here.

Not everyone fought the Empress. But not everyone had the capacity to *become* the Empress, either, that questionable honor that hung over heiress's heads like a guillotine.

Feferi practiced with a weapon because it was expected of her, before she even understood violence, before she had ever really seen it with her own eyes.

Feferi wasn't sure if there had ever been a time she hadn't known.

Knowing was not the same thing as understanding.

Territory marking was subtle and strange underwater. There was space in the ocean like there wasn't on land, broad tracts unused and untouched, everything blending together if you were in an unfamiliar space.

Feferi had never been sure if seadwellers were more territorial because they had so much space, or if they had become seadwelling because they were territorial. A brief check on the internet made it clear that most other people didn't know, either, though she hadn't known how to look it up until years after she had first started wondering.

The ocean had landmarks just as distinct as the roads and signs that lined the land-bound cities, but they were much less likely to have writing telling you where to turn and which way to go. It was about scent, and pheromones, discerning which trails were nights, perigrees, sweeps old and which were fresh and new. There were abandoned structures all across, especially closer to shore, set into rocks and made out of sunken ships, often half above the waves and half submerged. One couldn't tell, at a glance, if their owners had died, or moved, or made it to adulthood and been sent off-planet. People didn't often move into previously used hives until the old scents had faded to nearly nothing, until it seemed safe to assume no one was coming back to claim it. The oldest ones had kelp growing up through them, the wood rotted within, metal rusting at the edges, because no one had bothered to maintain it.

Learning how to navigate the subtleties of underwater territory marking took years. Most seadwelling wigglers didn't deal with it so early, because most seadwelling wigglers weren't heiresses, which meant they were more likely to be raised on or next to the ocean than under it. They got to dip their toes in a little at a time, aware of which slice of shore was theirs, which ship they circled.

Feferi was gifted the entire sea and told to explore.

She was young, and eager, and had never encountered another troll outside of the caverns. Her lusus had told her to be careful, in that whispering way she had that resonated through your head, but her lusus always told her to be careful, and so far it hadn't meant anything. Not really. There wasn't anything scary about the ocean. Seaweed tickled her fingers, her toes. The current rushed like it had somewhere important to be. And, most importantly of all, brightly colored cuttlefish darted just out of reach of her grasping hands, sweet and wriggly and not as cold as her skin. She went too far.

She didn't see the older seadweller until he reared in front of her, with all his teeth bared and a rattling hiss resonating through his thorax, the kind of noise Feferi couldn't even get her body to make yet. Feferi was young enough to not pose much of a threat -it would be sweeps before her eyes filled in, she was still on her first set of fangs- but often enough that meant nothing at all. The older troll swiped at her, a warning, a little bit of hurt to prove he'd kill if he had to, and Feferi froze solid, something terrible and icy dawning in her gut. She didn't move away.

It was only when he saw the color of the blood oozing slow from her arm that the other seadweller turned tail and sped away, snatching his claws away from her as if he was the one that had been hurt. Feferi still couldn't move for a long moment afterwards, as her shallow wound clouded the water pink. When the feeling came back to her limbs, she realized she was crying; she could only tell by the burn in her eyes that hadn't been there before, because the actual tears couldn't be felt when there was ocean all around her.

"You coulda died," said a voice from close by, in the strange bubbly accent that seadwellers adopt for speaking underwater, and Feferi whirled to face it, her hands coming up to defend if she needed to. What she saw, when she looked, was a boy around her age, thin-boned and colorless save for a bright lock that floated on the top of his head. He didn't look all that interested in attacking her. In fact, he was half hidden behind the lip of a submerged cavern, one of his hands hooked in the curled tail of a seahorse lusus that tossed its head at her. The boy's eyes darted fast from her face to the blood in the water. "That won't do at all," he added, like it meant anything.

The boy's name was Eridan, and he and his lusus brought her back home. Feferi cried the first half of the way, and laughed the second, even though Eridan wasn't really trying very hard to get her to.

He navigated this part of the ocean like he could see every ill-defined edge he was meant to skirt. He guided her around shiny-pink coral reefs, stopped her from taking the easy route that might cut across someone else's mark. He and his lusus knew shortcuts, through the caves, under sunken bridges that had once crossed the water in a different way. The trip back seemed much longer than the trip there had been. Once, Eridan paused and pointed upwards, through the filtered moonlight that broke through the waves, far above, to the shadowy outline of a massive boat.

"I'm up there," he said. "If you were wonderin'."

When she was finally back in the familiar coil of her lusus’s tentacles, being fussed over, Eridan nodded like his duty was done.

“Wait!” Feferi called, before he could escape. “Do you want to hang out, maybe?”

It was getting towards dawn, and Eridan needed to be back in his coon on the lowest level of his ship before the sun broke horizon. But they agreed she would come the next night, after she finished receiving the older troll that brought Gl’bgolyb fresh lusus carcasses several times a perigree. Feferi never liked the blood, the way it moved in the water, the way she felt like she could taste it in the back of her throat when her gills took something in. But she knew her lusus had to eat, could almost feel it itching under her skin when she went too long without and got too hungry. It was like Feferi was hungry, too. And she worried. The troll that brought Gl’bgolyb her food was nearing off-planet age, and Feferi wasn’t sure who would replace him once he was gone.

But things had a way of working themselves out.

“Adjust your grip, your stance looks weird from over here,” Eridan said, and Feferi’s fingers slid down, watching him as he watched her. She could tell when it looked right by how his face twitched. Eridan’s face was still small and somber. You wouldn’t know he was an orphaner now unless he told you. If that was even what you called it, these nights-- Feferi knew that was what it had been called in the old times, when adults were on Alternia, but then it was a *job*. This was basically a hobby. No one was paying him. But it wasn’t exactly a normal hobby, either. It wasn’t as if you could form a club around it, or collect trophies like collecting stamps. There wasn’t a special cabinet for severed lusus heads. And Gl’bgolyb liked the heads best, anyway; that would never do.

“Betta?” Feferi asked, and her legs had slid into the right position before he even nodded, sweeps of practice making it easy. She thrust her trident, spun it, stabbed again. Eridan paced like a caged tigerfish to follow her while she circled the training dummy, his ears twitching like he was contemplating something big.

(He hadn’t grown into his earfins yet, which had a growth spurt before the rest of him. Feferi had called him Dumbo until he got genuinely self conscious. She still felt bad.)

Feferi faced up against the dummy, forged sturdy and crafted to be approximately the size of an adult troll. When she hit it again, hard as she could, it shuddered, shaking all the way up to its indistinct, untrollish face. Even without eyes, it seemed to stare back at her.

She lowered her weapon.

“You *gotta* stop doin’ that,” Eridan said, and Feferi went for her water bottle as if that was the plan all along, taking a long drink and then splashing some against her drying gills. She would be fine *without* it, just as able on land as long as she switched to breathing through her lungs, but it was annoying. Why be uncomfortable when you didn’t have to be?

“I keep thinking about the buoy from that silly game,” she said, deftly changing the subject. She’d brought this up before, but it was still bothering her. “The angry one! I mean, I’ve never met anyone who wrote in gray, before. What do you think he is, reely?”

“Gotta stop doin’ that, too.” Eridan responded, and Feferi ignored his rolling eyes. “I mean, does it *matter*?”

“Just answer the questfin!”

“Ugh, definitely some no-count lowblood. If he was higher he wouldn’t hide.”

“Whale, why does he have to hide?”

“Ashamed, probably. An’ I can’t blame him.”

“Do you reely think?”

“Well, yeah,” Eridan said, sounding like he was taking extra care not to say ‘whale’. He was so pissy tonight! “I’d hide too, if I was somethin’ so weak.” She looked at him, feeling sort of strange about that answer, and he looked back, expectant. Feferi was taller than him already. They were both aware if she ever wasn’t taller than him, it wouldn’t be for long.

“Whale, ocray,” she said, finally, stretching her arms above her head to feel the pull of muscles in her arms, the way her body was strengthening and shifting. “I guess we should train a little moray, and then maybe a break?”

“You’ve had a break already,” Eridan grumped, and just like that she knew they’d be watching a movie before the hour was up.

Feferi had already been waiting when the video call alert flashed onto her husktop screen. “Sollux!” she chided, before the image had even finished resolving. “You said you wouldn’t be late this time!” But when the picture fully loaded, Sollux was bleeding, golden dribbles drying tacky underneath his mouth and nose. “What happened?” she asked, immediately abandoning the scolding. It took a moment of confusion to figure out exactly what she meant, but when he did, he just rolled his eyes and swiped his shirtsleeve over his bloodied face.

“It’s nothing,” he said, and really seemed to mean it.

“Nothing?” she exclaimed. “You’re bleeding, Sollux!” He grinned at her through the grainy lens of his camera, showing bloody teeth.

“Yeah, well. You should see the other guy.”

“There’s another guy?” Feferi asked, her voice going shrill. “You were in a fight?” Sollux seemed to be catching on that she wasn’t going to let it go or find it as funny as he seemed to think it was, and he gave her a lopsided little shrug, looking unsettled.

“Wasn’t much of a fight,” he said, which just sounded to Feferi like a yes.

“But *why*?” He looked at her like she was speaking East Alternian. She couldn’t tear her gaze from the blood still smeared on his dull gray skin.

“I don’t fucking know, FF. Ask the dude that started it. He probably wanted a gutterblood two beat up on and wasn’t exactly expecting me two be the most powerful psionic on the goddamn hemisphere.”

“You didn’t even know him?”

“Why the fuck would I know him? All our friends are online.”

“That’s naut--!” She broke off, frustrated. “Why do you keep acting like this is normal?” It was his face, then, that told her, more than anything he could’ve said. “...This is-- This is normal?” He shrugged in her direction, abruptly preoccupied with scraping some dried honey off his keyboard. “Why?”

“Lowblood life, FF,” he said. “I don’t expect you two get it.”

Aradia was dead.

Tavros was... hurt, badly hurt. And Aradia was dead. Feferi would never get to speak to her again. There would be no more late-night giggling over trollian, no more weird-bad-fascinating stories from Aradia’s grave robbing expeditions. They’d never meet in person. Feferi would never get to compare the size and warmth of their hands, like they had talked about one night when they had wondered about how much bigger and colder Feferi might be when Aradia was on the exact opposite side of the hemospectrum. Aradia was dead, and Aradia was gone.

Vriska was hurt, too, but (and this seemed wrigglerish to say) she had *started* it, so Feferi wasn’t feeling as bad for her as she might’ve otherwise. She thought she might be angry at Vriska, really. She wasn’t angry at her friends often. She was angry now. She was maybe a little bit furious. But mostly she was-- this was what mourning felt like, wasn’t it?

People died every day on Alternia. But the people who died usually hadn’t been her friends. It felt different, somehow. It felt bigger, and harsher, like she had dived too deep too fast and put pressure on her lungs before her gills opened up. And the pressure just kept mounting.

She couldn’t go to Eridan, who would still play up like he didn’t care because it was easier for him that way, because he was supposed to like Vriska, and liking Vriska meant thinking she was right, and if he had to admit she wasn’t right he’d have to admit he was wrong about her. She knew him well enough to know that without even having to be told. And-- fine, whatever. If that worked for him. He wasn’t who she was angry with. But she couldn’t go to him.

So Feferi had heard the news and swam to the rubbery coils of her lusus to cry, like she hadn’t since she was a wriggler. And Gl’bgolyb welcomed her with open tendrils, wrapped her up within them to pet at her hair and push the tears from her eyes even though it should have been impossible to even know they were falling. Feferi swam in until she was completely enveloped, cocooned in white tentacles to the point where she couldn’t be seen from outside. She didn’t want to be found, right now.

She couldn’t understand why this had happened. How this had happened. How her friends had heart each other so much, what they wanted, what anyone was getting from this.

“Why?” she asked, aloud, knowing her lusus probably wouldn’t answer, even if she knew. “Why does it have to be like this?”

She cried herself hoarse that night, until she felt sorry for herself and sorry for everyone, sorry even for Vriska. Sorry for Terezi, who might still be culled before ascendancy if her blindness was ruled too much of a liability and not enough of an advantage. Sorry for Karkat, who was so angry and so scared and so wrapped tight, whose blood color she still couldn’t guess at, whatever it was, who had never grown out of hiding. Sorry for Tavros, who hadn’t deserved it and would never get to be without it. Sorry for Sollux, who had to fight even when he didn’t know he was doing it, who was probably hurting worse than she was, who she hadn’t been able

to contact for hours. Sorry for Eridan, who kept playing pretend even when she could see his pusher weaken and knew he didn’t want to. Sorry for Kanaya, who didn’t know how to help. Sorry for Nepeta, who was too frightened to FLARP and now had good reason to be. Sorry for Equius, because she knew he would be sad, even if he would say it didn’t matter. Sorry for Gamzee, even, though she had never seen much phase him and didn’t know if this would be the start. She was sorry for all of them. She was sorry for everyone. She was sorry for all of Alternia.

Why did it have to be like this?

Did it have to be like this?

Feferi advanced, her trident fully balanced in her hand, rolling with the movement of her body, like a wave gathering momentum before it crashed onto shore. ‘Like a part of you,’ Eridan had said, over and over. ‘It’s gotta be like a part of you. An’ not just in the way where you’re used to it.’

She thought she might have managed it by now, as she and Eridan faced off, his sword tight in his palm and his eyes flickering over her as he watched for her next attack. The training dummy had been beat to all hell sweeps ago, and they hadn’t bothered to replace it. A live target was much better practice. It moved, for one -- but mostly it was the way that you couldn’t predict it. The way you had to learn to watch, to listen. She had sparred more than just Eridan, had tried different styles, searched for different hints in different faces. There was always something. No one, no matter how experienced, how old, no matter what they fought with, or how good they were at poker... no one was entirely without a tell.

Eridan had stopped growing the instant he hit eight sweeps, but he was quick on his feet and with his blade. He was used to ranged weapons, so he liked a safe distance, got panicked if you pushed too close. But he was clever, and vicious, and he knew her moves almost as well as she knew his. Feferi wasn’t fighting him because it’d be easy. It wasn’t an ego boost that she needed.

What she needed was all the practice that she could get.

While his seabound hive rocked in the water, they played advance and retreat. He moved, she followed. He sliced, she jumped. She hit, he countered, not-quite-fencing while both their weapons gleamed in the light from two waxing moons. Eridan never held back with her, never faltered to spare her feelings, and she loved him for it. She loved him enough to push, and push, and push, to make every step in this dance count, to leave him pinned and pained up against the deck with enough in it that he might falter before he got back up and tried again.

With a subvocal roar rumbling through her thorax, and a full set of seadweller teeth bared, and every part of her that screamed POISON -- DO NOT EAT showing, Feferi lunged, and she looked her best friend dead in the eyes as she did it.

Feferi wasn’t sure if there had ever been a time she hadn’t known.

Knowing didn’t mean understanding. Understanding didn’t mean being ready.

Or at least, it hadn't. But she was older now -- in fact, she was old enough.

The question left to answer was this: would she get any older?

The Condesce liked the televise these things. The official ones. Another dead heiress on planet-wide screens. Job security. A vote of faith for the groupies. Ad money, money that she owned and operated and curated anyway, funneling right back into her silk-lined pockets. Soulless cameras staring, unseeing, to deliver the news.

It'd be scary, if she was someone else.

No. That wasn't right. It was still scary. It was terrifying. It was the biggest thing she'd ever done, and it could end up being the biggest thing she ever would do. The floor had been cleaned until it shined, but behind Feferi's eyelids, she could almost see the pink smears past contenders had left behind, the only mark they ever made on the world. In the back of her pan, she could very nearly hear her *lulus* whispering to be careful, like she was a wriggler again, exploring outside of her territory.

But she wasn't a wriggler. Not anymore. And Feferi knew what she was fighting for. Maybe the other heiresses had fought for something too, but Feferi knew they had mostly fought not to die. You could see it in their faces when they walked into the arena, like they were already sure they were headed to execution, the way they only struggled long enough to last a few precious extra microsweeps, to make the most of time they didn't have. It wasn't the same as what she was fighting for, not really. And she knew that even the firmest of the dead could never have been as resolute in their faith as she was tonight.

The people she was fighting for would be watching. All of Alternia would be watching -- it was mandatory programming. But it was a select few that would be waiting for a result most of the planet couldn't even fathom.

Feferi's trident, newly sharpened, was heavy in her hand. Heavy like a promise, or heavy like a conspiracy. Her jewelry had been left behind, traded for utility and protection and any tokens her friends had pressed into her hands before she left. (Cloth that breathed and moved like nothing else for her leotard, from Kanaya. Something sharp and biting around her neck from Vriska. Secrets from Terezi, strength from Karkat, lightning in her veins from Sollux. From Eridan, a knife that hid so thoroughly in her shoes that she could barely remember it was there. The Empress fought dirty. Feferi would too.)

A voice boomed on a loudspeaker, and the door she held herself behind began to open. When Feferi stepped forward, the fear was still there, but buried beneath surety like concrete, and iron, like the people she knew.

Before her there were lights, and people, and last minute money being exchanged. There were bookies in the arena. The Condesce always bet on herself.

The thing she hadn't bet on was Feferi Peixes.





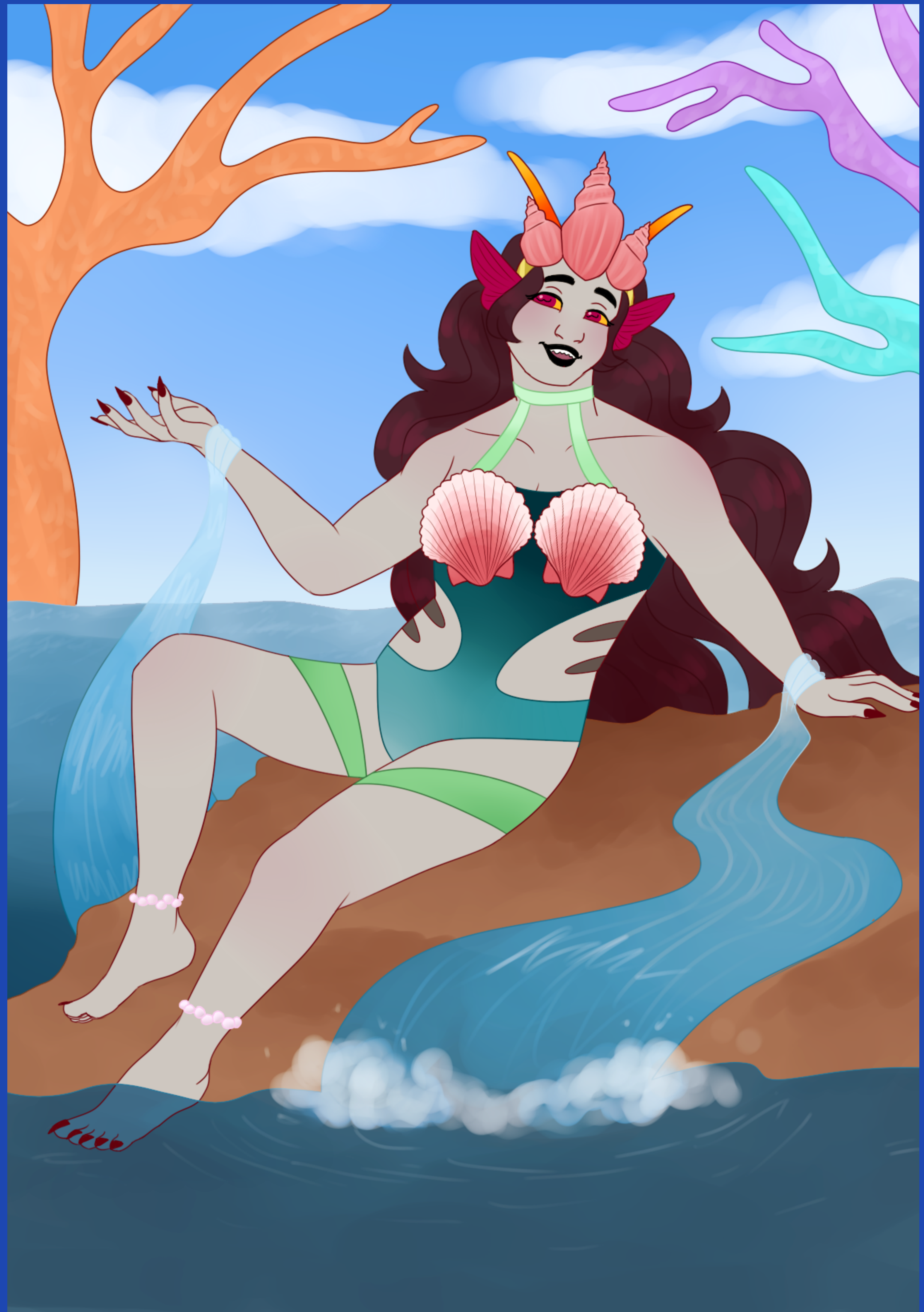


TATERTOT
FAIRY



TATERTOT
FAIRY







Ending Note

From Mod Risa ^^

To the Artists:

Funnily enough, I didn't expect to get as many entries as we did! But, in the end it was all the more impressive!! It was really great to work with all of you and see everything y'all made! You all have such great taste in colors and arrangements and composition? Everything came out utterly perfect and amazing and unique and beautiful!

Without all of you we wouldn't have this lovely zine! Thanks so much for being a part of it! You guys are amazing!! *round of applause*

I'd also like to thank Mod Scy and Mod Lightning for helping me hold down the fort. Also thanks mod Scy for being the Very Experienced Fandom Project Person.

To the Readers:

Hope you guys enjoyed this whole thing! It's been so exciting to have such a large collection of artists' arts and I genuinely hope y'all enjoyed it! Please give a round of applause to all these great artists, and also feel free to click their URLs in the Table of Contents and support their work! They'll likely be posting singular copies of their arts!

To All:

So long, and thanks for all the Feferi. It's Feferi loving hours now~! Let's appreciate Homestucks' cuttlefish princess altogether.